

# MSM Masterclass

Module: **ALCOHOL AND POPPERS**

## **FACILITATOR GUIDANCE NOTES**

### **Description to be shared with participants in advance**

In this session we will consider the experiences and needs of men in relation to their use of alcohol and poppers. *In the HIV Prevention Needs Assessment alcohol and poppers were the most common drugs used in relation to sexual activity.* A separate Masterclass session is available on the topic of drugs which addresses the use of drugs like cannabis or ecstasy and New Psychoactive Substances (NPS); it is worth remembering that men who use services may use a range of substances.

In this Masterclass session you will hear about what men report about their use of alcohol and poppers and their views on how this might be discussed or considered in the context of sex and relationships and when accessing sexual health services. There will be an opportunity to reflect on what you think works well about current service provision, and consider how we can provide sexual health and HIV services which play a role in supporting men to consider their use of alcohol or poppers, particularly where they impact negatively on sexual health.

Suggested duration of this session is 35/40 minutes.

### **Before the session**

Ensure participants complete Reflection Sheet 1 before attending the Masterclass  
In preparing for the Masterclass ask participants to pay particular attention to the engagement they have with men who talk about alcohol or poppers; ask staff to jot down any issues or topics or questions that they feel are important.

By the end of this session participants will have:

1. Developed a greater awareness of what we know about alcohol and poppers use amongst gay, bisexual and MSM.
2. Recognised the individual professional understandings and characteristics that they need to develop to support men to talk about alcohol and poppers and their impact on relationships, decisions, risk and sexual health.
3. Understood what characteristics of a service are likely to help engage and sustain the attendance of men for whom there is a need to consider alcohol or poppers use.

**Follow up:** Further information is available from these sources (this is listed on the final slide)

- HIV Prevention Needs Assessment (NHS Lothian and NHS GGC)  
<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Health/Services/Sexual-Health/HIVMSMNeeds>
- FAQ Scotland chapters address the issues of interest in this session: Chapter 2 *Alcohol* Chapter and Chapter 14 *Poppers*; both available at  
<http://www.faqscotland.co.uk>

- A report on NHS Clinical Staff interviews (also part of the HIV Prevention Needs Assessment) <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Health/Services/Sexual-Health/HIVMSMNeeds/interviews>
- Staff can also access the Alcohol Brief Intervention module on LearnPro. The ABI eLearning module is an opportunity to enhance knowledge and introduces motivational approaches which can enable the discussion of alcohol consumption confidently.: <http://communityhelp.learnprouk.com/>

### **Resources:**

PowerPoint slides as a hand-out.

The session facilitator should prepare a hand-out/information on local or online services or agencies where staff can signpost or refer men on to.

### **Outline**

**The session is built around a number of slides which draw on information from the NHS Lothian/GGC HIV Prevention Needs Assessment including the FAQ Community Engagement work, and other work that address the experiences, needs and rights of men who have sex with men. Slides may have prompts for discussion; either as one group or in pairs/smaller groups. As a general guide around 5 minutes should be allocated for 'discussion' slides.**

Facilitator guide notes for PowerPoint slides is suggested as follows:

#### **Slide 1 Title/Introduction**

As the advance information stated, in this session we will consider the experiences and needs of men in relation to their use of alcohol and poppers. *In the HIV Prevention Needs Assessment these were the most common drugs used in relation to sexual activity.* A separate Masterclass session is available on the topic of drugs which addresses the use of illegal drugs like cannabis or ecstasy and New Psychoactive Substances (NPS). It is always worth remembering that men may use a range of substances.

Understanding how men live their lives, including how they use alcohol and poppers, is a necessary part of delivering a holistic, person-centred service. Some aspects of alcohol or using poppers we will discuss in the session will raise questions and concerns we may have for men in terms of HIV/STI risk. This session is part of the Masterclass programme because it is important for clinic staff to understand as best we can each man's health and wellbeing (both physical and mental) to discuss HIV risk and prevention.

Much of the information on the slides we will be looking at in this session is taken from the HIV Needs Assessment FAQ community engagement work; men participated in online surveys and interviews. Some of the information is also from other aspects of the HIV Needs Assessment and other useful sources of information about the experiences, needs and rights of men who have sex with men.

#### **Slide 2**

(Facilitator: no need to read learning outcomes out but just refer to these as follows) This slide describes what we intend participants will get from taking part in this session. Firstly,

we will look at alcohol use and then at a drug commonly used by gay and bisexual men, poppers – more of that later.

### Slide 3

#### **Is alcohol misuse a common problem for gay and bisexual men? Does this matter when it comes to sexual health?**

The FAQ community engagement work found that:

- Alcohol plays a significant role in the social and sexual lives of gay and bisexual men.
- Men recognised that alcohol impairs decision making, sometimes explaining decisions they might not otherwise make; in some circumstances they reported not remembering decisions made or risks taken.
- Men who drink alcohol while having sex report higher partner numbers.
- Alcohol use also features in the experiences of violence men have reported.

### Slide 4/5/6

Men talked about some of these issues in these ways:

I live alone, I wouldn't say lonely but you go out more. This means drinking alcohol, so the next day or two, I feel down, a bit anxious. So I'm trying not to drink so much. It's with circumstances, I can feel anxious. And with alcohol, it's the old cliché, seems like a good idea at the time and the next day you think 'Oh my god did I do that?' (Gay, 26-35, HIV negative)

I was in a relationship with a man for a year. We broke up just about a year ago. He was drinking and would get violent... He had been violent before with me and with other people. Alcohol was the main trigger but he just wasn't right I don't think. It was only one or two times before this but not serious but it was getting worse and worse. (Gay, 16-25, HIV negative)

Most people my age/gender use alcohol to initiate sexual encounters. Is my experience typical of gay men my age? (Online respondent)

I drink like a fish and don't care about the consequences, makes me sad when I'm hung-over. (Online respondent)

### Slide 7

#### **Discussing alcohol within a sexual health service**

One of the FAQ community engagement online surveys asked men if they *have ever discussed alcohol/their drinking with someone at a sexual health clinic* and *would they ever do so*. Although a relatively small number of men responded to this particular survey (58 men) only 12 men (16.7%) said they have discussed alcohol/their drinking at a clinic, but the majority (46 men/64.8%) might or would discuss it.

**Discussion:** (Initially with a partner then open to seek views in the group).

What are your experiences of talking to men about their alcohol use?

Do/Would you ask explicitly: '**Do you use alcohol when having sex?**'

## Slide 8

### What are poppers?

*Facilitator: check in the room how familiar people are with poppers.*

This slide explains what poppers are:

Poppers is the common name given to a drug which is in the class of drugs called alkyl nitrites. In Europe poppers contain isopropyl nitrate. They are usually bought on the internet or in gay clubs or bars, in sex shops or in shops selling drug paraphernalia. Poppers are inhaled and it is illegal to sell them as advertised for human consumption, so they are usually sold as room odourisers. They became part of the disco/club scene during the 1970s and are used by gay and bisexual men when having sex because they relax muscles and enhance orgasm.

## Slide 9/10

### Are poppers commonly used by gay and bisexual men? Does this matter when it comes to sexual health?

The FAQ community engagement work found the following:

- In the first wave of online FAQ work (with responses from 450 men) two-fifths of men reported that they like to use poppers; men 35+ were more likely to use them.
- In the second wave of FAQ online the 'poppers' themed survey showed that one in five men used poppers *most times* when having sex, similarly around 1 in 5 *often* when having sex, with a further 2 in every 5 men *sometimes* using them when having sex. This means that of these respondents only 1 in 5 men never used poppers.
- In reports of *recent sex* approximately 20% of men interviewed by FAQ reported use of poppers.
- Men use poppers because they heighten sexual pleasure, decrease inhibitions and facilitate receptive anal sex.
- Feeling uninhibited can affect the decisions men make.
- Men wanted to know more about how safe poppers are.

## Slide 11/12

Men talked about some of these issues in these ways:

A rush that makes me horny and more into the moment. (Online respondent)

It takes sex to the next level, whether it's masturbation or with someone else. It also helps overcome some psychological barriers to bottoming, and makes the whole process of preparing for bottoming quicker. (Online respondent)

Makes me horny / dirty as fuck. Inhibitions out the window. Usually the best (and longest) sex I have. (Online respondent)

Nice and sexual a bit of foreplay you get kissing and get really horny on the poppers so it naturally progresses into fucking... Just the enjoyment of it, getting high on the enjoyment of it. Sometimes if it's poppers, the poppers take over it's just the enjoyment of it. (Gay, 26-35, HIV negative)

Are using poppers safe? There's not much information to go on. (Gay, 16-25, HIV negative)

### Slide 13

#### Dangers of poppers/key points

*This slide addresses some of the questions and concerns about poppers safety. The issues with poppers described here are not to be taken as 'medical advice' to be given to men, but are a summary of the general health concerns about using poppers.*

- Poppers have little-to-no potential for addiction. Researchers are unable to find any data to suggest direct neurotoxicity associated with the use of Amyl Nitrite. There is potential for negative side effects and overdose symptoms associated with acute intake of poppers including headache, dizziness, nausea, fainting, suffocation or irregular heartbeat. Long term use of Amyl Nitrate can lead to permanent damage to the brain, bones, heart, kidneys and liver.
- Using poppers facilitates receptive anal sex and so their use is associated with increased risk of HIV transmission/acquisition.
- A specific risk in terms of gay/bisexual men using poppers with other drugs is that taken with Viagra poppers can cause a serious decrease in blood pressure, leading to fainting, stroke, or even heart attack.

(Source: [https://drugs-forum.com/forum/showwiki.php?title=Amyl\\_Nitrite](https://drugs-forum.com/forum/showwiki.php?title=Amyl_Nitrite))

### Slide 14

#### Discussing poppers with a sexual health service

One of the FAQ community engagement online surveys asked men if they *have ever discussed using poppers with someone at a sexual health clinic* and *would they ever* do so.

- From the sample of 209 men only 8 men (3.9%) said they have discussed using poppers at a clinic.
- But the majority (130 men/62.2%) might or would discuss it.

**Discussion:** Initially with a partner then open briefly to seek views in the group.

What are your experiences of talking to men about using poppers?

Do/Would you ever ask explicitly: **'Do you use poppers when having sex?'**

### Slide 15

#### Connecting alcohol, poppers and sexual health

To summarise, we can see the connection between alcohol and poppers and sexual health in terms of the following concerns:

- When men are uninhibited or unaware of what is going on in a sexual encounter they can find themselves having anal sex without condoms.
- Men may recognise that their alcohol use has become a problem, but they are unsure if a sexual health/HIV service is a place to talk about it.

**Discussion:** Full group. So, if problematic alcohol use and poppers can be associated with ongoing risk behaviours:

- Do we deal with this adequately within current sexual health/HIV services?
- In terms of men needing support beyond that which you can give, do you know where can you signpost or refer men to?

*Facilitator should provide hand-out/information on services or agencies (internal to NHS or outwith) where staff can signpost or refer men to.*

**Slide 16**

Ask participants to take the last minute to note down a few thoughts on the reflection sheet provided.